

Bringing health care to rural communities

UIC College of Medicine at Rockford trains next generation of rural-based medical professionals

When it comes to health-care accessibility, Illinois ranks among the worst in the nation. Rural areas in particular have been hard hit. For example, as of March 2001, 70 out of the 83 counties classified as rural were underserved. However, the Rockford campus has found a way to combat that.

Since its inauguration in 1993, the Rural Medical Education Program has not only helped students develop the skills needed to work as primary-care physicians, but it continues toward its main goal of attracting more students to the field of rural primary care. RMED is a component of the Center for Rural Health Professions, which also addresses pharmacy, nursing,

of primary care and life as a rural physician. "Our curriculum is in addition to the traditional ones," says **Michael Glasser**, PHD '83 UIUC, assistant dean of rural health professions. Students in the program "learn about mental health problems, chronic health problems, such as diabetes, use of complimentary medicine, farm injuries, how to work within a community and rural life. They also deal with issues such as quality of health care, access to health care or certain problems in a community, such as alcohol or drug abuse."

Jennifer Wisdom-Behounek, 24, a Villa Grove native, enrolled as a student in the RMED program in 2001. She said the curriculum has better prepared her and other students for rural medicine. "We still take the regular medical courses," she says. "But we also learn about the issues unique to rural life and rural health care."

The program's apex comes during the fourth year when seniors participate in a 16-week rural preceptorship at one of 23 sites across Illinois. During the preceptorship, students work with RMED family physicians and with collaborating hospitals. There, they receive hands-on training providing care to patients living in rural communities.

"The students work with a family doctor for an extensive period of time," says Glasser. "This provides a level of continuity that they may not receive with other programs."

During the preceptorship, students also conduct a community-oriented primary care project. These projects range in topic and are chosen by the students based on their interest in a specific topic that addresses the needs of a rural community. Recent projects completed by RMED students include research on the mental health needs of rural communities and working to establish smoking-cessation aids.

Amanda Pillers, 24, a Mt. Vernon native, says she made the right choice in joining the RMED program because the program not only teaches students, but also assists them as they progress through medical school and in finding a position after residency.

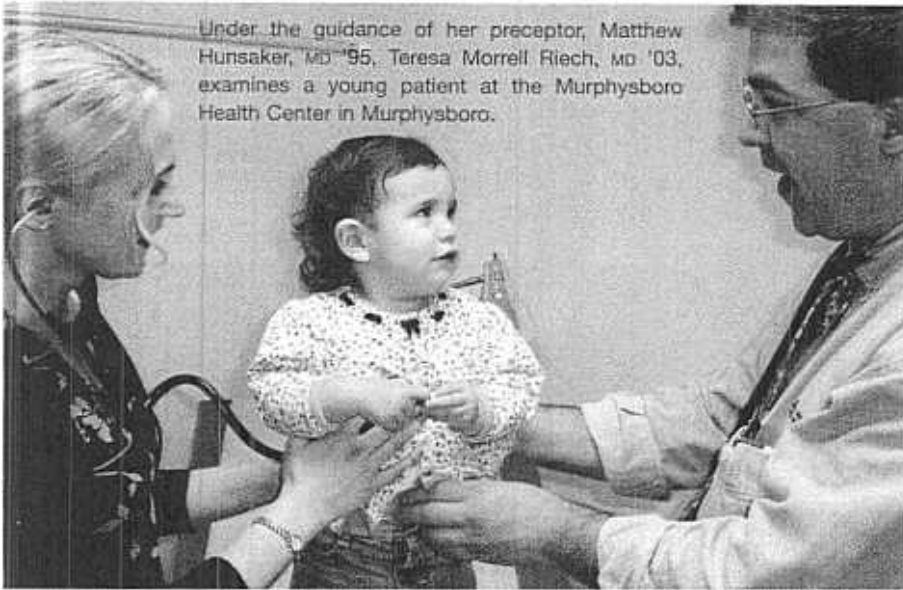
"The program flows well, and it maintains good connections with the graduates and residents," says Pillers. "It's a helpful process, and everyone is supportive."

Glasser agrees that students in the RMED program receive the training they'll need for working in rural medicine. He also believes the program serves a higher purpose than just education.

"Students not only learn while out in the community, they also give to the community while learning," he says.

—Kevin O'Holleran

Under the guidance of her preceptor, Matthew Hunsaker, MD '95, Teresa Morrell Riech, MD '03, examines a young patient at the Murphysboro Health Center in Murphysboro.



social work, public health and dentistry needs in rural areas. Students entering RMED sign a pledge indicating that they will work in a rural community after they have completed their medical training and residencies.

Along with their other required medical courses, RMED students attend classes, conferences and seminars that relate to rural health care, family medicine and community-oriented primary care.

Each year, 15 to 20 students are chosen to participate in the program. The highly selective process requires students to be Illinois residents and to have a history and future expectation of living in rural Illinois. They must also show strong academic success, including high scores on the Medical College Admission Tests. Finally, each prospective student is interviewed and approved by the RMED recruitment and retention committee.

During their first three years of study, students learn the basics